

Blue Ocean Faith

May 6, 2018 (Easter 6, Year B)

Thank you to Ken for inviting me! I'm honored to be with you.

I'm currently serving as the president of the board of Genesis of Ann Arbor—the owners and managers of this space.

So, on behalf of Genesis: We are really happy to have you in our building! And since we're all in this together, let me tell you a little about Genesis.

In 1970, St. Clare's Episcopal Church opened its doors to TBE, a Reform Jewish congregation. Then in 1974, after four years of renting, the two congregations formed the Genesis partnership—and decided to dwell together in this space as equals and as friends. Here's how they described the decision:

Although the world has always been torn by distrust, suspicion, waste, prejudice and the threat of economic upheaval and war, its citizens are today becoming more aware of the absolute need to trust, conserve, believe, give and love if we and our heirs are to survive as the children of God. Both the Temple and St. Clare believe that by jointly owning and sharing the same facilities for their various worship and nonworship activities, they are demonstrating that out of their act of faith and trust can be found a significant mutuality of understanding.

It is a goal of St. Clare to affirm the aspirations of the Temple to finally have a home of its own. It is a goal of the Temple to establish its permanent religious home, . . . It is a corporate goal of both congregations to provide the current and expanded facilities for future use by the community.

Understanding that both congregations will maintain their unique, separate, . . . identities, and will continue to worship and be fruitful in the ways which are unique to both understandings of the nature of God . . . , each believes that their actions herein will stand as a symbol of the power of reason and love to overcome distrust and the prejudices of our separate histories.

A couple of key points:

First of all, a desire for a home—we all need a place to be [loved], a place to put down roots, a place to abide.

Second, hospitality—act of opening to each other and to others in love.

Finally, we can only overcome prejudice and distrust—we can only be fruitful—by being together with those who are different from us.

As it turns out, none of this is particularly easy. It has required sacrifice small and large. But I think it is fruitful in many ways.

The fact that you are here is a sign of that fruitfulness—and Blue Ocean is also bearing fruit, in person and online.

We have created a place of love and trust—and we are glad you are choosing to be with us.

Today's reading: also about abiding—with Jesus and with each other. It's about being together in Jesus' love, and about the new kind of relationship that love shows us, and about what kinds of things are made possible by that new relationship, what kind of fruit we can bear.

This passage is part of what Bible scholars call the “farewell discourses,” chapters 14-17 of the Gospel of John.

They are not found in any of the other gospels—unique to John.

In John's gospel, appears after the Last Supper.

I imagine everyone sitting around after dinner, after Jesus has washed his friends' feet, after Judas has left. The disciples mostly not clued in, Jesus well aware. End of his ministry, assessment, what's really important, the things he wants to pass along to the people he has been closest to.

Jesus said to his disciples, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

Abide in my love. My father loves me, I love you, abide in my love.

This sounds like a warm invitation: stay here, dwell here—in my love.

A long while ago, I was considering becoming a pastor. To do that in the Episcopal church, you have to take a year long course and at the end of it is a retreat.

During the retreat, we had some quiet time to reflect on a Bible passage. And I found myself sitting in front of a sculpture. It was an image of God holding the body of Jesus, just taken down from the cross, in the way one might carry a child. God is heart broken and grief stricken.

And as I continued to look at it, the image changed in my mind to become something else. It became an image of Jesus carrying me.

At that moment I had a gut-wrenching sense for the first time of what Jesus' love is like—and what it might feel like to abide in that love. Gathered up and held close, like a child.

It was a gift.

Let's pause.

Think about the ways you abide, dwell, stay, live with Jesus.

Think about the ways Jesus abides with you—perhaps even when you're not aware of it.

And if you do not feel this sense of living with Jesus, or if you want more of this feeling, I invite you to ask Jesus for more of his presence now.

As I said, that feeling was a gift. It was a noun: "abide in my love."

But, as Jesus goes on to describe it, becomes a verb, an imperative verb, a commanding verb.

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

The commandment is the relationship. The commandment is love.

In our culture, we tend to see love as a feeling or an experience. But Jesus' love is not easy love. Not warm cuddly love. It is sacrificial love. Death-defying love. In love, Jesus followed his Father's commandment all the way to the cross.

This is my commandment, Jesus says, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Let me tell you about one of Jesus's friends.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer—Lutheran pastor and theologian in the first half of the twentieth century. Had a comfortable middle class upbringing in a large, loving, intellectual, musical family. He studied theology beginning at age 16 and completed his doctoral thesis when he was 21. He taught theology at Berlin beginning in 1931, and in 1933 began speaking out against Hitler. He became a leader in the Confessing Church, which resisted attempts to unite all Lutheran churches under the Reich.

As he increasingly spoke against the Third Reich, he suffered harassment and censorship, and friends he'd made when he studied in the US invited him to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He went—but immediately regretted it and returned to Germany, saying that he could never live in a liberated Germany if he had abandoned his fellow Germans when they suffered under Nazism.

Bonhoeffer participated in various plots to assassinate Hitler; arrested; tried; convicted; held in Nazi prisons and then in Buchenwald and finally Flossenbergl. He was executed there two weeks before the camp was liberated by Allies.

If you read Bonhoeffer's writing, you see that the foundation of his faith was a deep abiding in Jesus' love--a love that insists on seeing others as friends. And a love that commands action, that does not shy away from speaking out against anything that doesn't seem like love.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.

Laying down our lives

Bonhoeffer didn't go looking for martyrdom: he followed Jesus' commandment to its inevitable conclusion, in his particular place and time.

We have our own context. Where are the places where we see people around us being treated as "others"? How might we, following Jesus' commandment and Bonhoeffer's example, act out of love for them?

One place I see this action happening is in the Poor People's Campaign. Grassroots movement, led by poor people, continuing the legacy of Martin Luther King and his poor people's campaign of 1968. Today's movement asks people to come together across political parties, denominations, and various social movements to shift the moral conversation in our country away from politicized moral issues such as abortion and teaching evolution and prayer in schools, to how we show love for one another.

King identified three evils: racism, militarism, and poverty. The new poor people's campaign identifies another: ecological devastation.

Next week, in forty states, we'll begin a season of raising awareness around these social issues by taking direct action based in love and nonviolence. In other words, civil disobedience.

I've said that this movement is being led by poor people. But this movement also recognizes that poor people are not always able to participate in civil disobedience and to risk arrest—because of a criminal record, because of their immigration status, because of employment or childcare issues.

And so, some of us who are friends of the poor people who are leading this movement have chosen to be trained to risk arrest on their behalf, to disrupt the unjust systems in our country that criminalize and marginalize the poor.

No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

For most of us, this will require somewhere between \$100 and \$500 for our bail, a night or two in jail, a few court appearances, and, perhaps a misdemeanor on our record. For some of us, it may require more. But, following Jesus' commandment to love, we choose to follow.

Let's pause.

How might God be calling you to lay down your life for friends or strangers, how might God be calling you to sacrificial love today?

Conclusion

I do not call you servants any longer, Jesus said, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends. . . . And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.

Jesus is calling us to become the beloved community—like those first disciples, sitting around the dinner table, wrapped up with love into a mystery they couldn't understand, a future that would require unimaginable sacrifices of them and bear unimagined fruit through them.

Jesus is calling us to abide in love, with Jesus, with God, with each other.

Jesus is calling us to see others—those who look different, live different, love different, speak different—as Jesus' friends, and to love them as our own—and to be willing, in ways large and small, to lay down our lives for them.

The commandment is the relationship. Like the disciples, we are called to love and to act in community with each other in Christ—and through that beloved community we will bear fruit that will change the world.